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Gwendolyn Brooks: Biography

A Yemisi Jimoh, PhD

University of Massachusetts Amherst, jimoh@afroam.umass.edu

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Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)

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[A Yemisi Jimoh \(University of Massachusetts Amherst\)](#)

(Gwendolyn Blakeley)

Autobiographer, Children's/Young Adult writer, Novelist, Poet, Publisher, Teacher/Professor.

Active 1930-2000 in United States

Among the most innovative poets in the United States we find a seat for Gwendolyn Brooks whose uses of form and language as well as her perspicacious evocation of life as she saw it have made her a significant twentieth-century literary figure. In Brooks's poetic corpus readers find an economy of language, apt neologisms, unique turns of phrases, and expansions of genre, all wrought from her sixty eight years as an active poet with numerous awards and honours to match her prolific body

of work. Brooks, a post Harlem Renaissance writer, was nonetheless part of the New Negro era, and as a lifetime resident of Chicago, she participated in the energetic intellectual and artistic life of the Depression era Black Chicago Writers' literary movement. Even though Chicago is the location that inspired most of Brooks's poetry, she has insisted that her poetry elicits a people rather than a place.

As a child, Gwendolyn Brooks lived a comfortable and sheltered life in an increasingly segregated Chicago, Illinois. When David and Keziah Brooks purchased their family home for themselves and their two children they were only the second black family to live on South Champlain. Before long, this well-kept, tree-lined, South Side street became prime real estate for Chicago's black middle-class families. Gwendolyn Brooks, the first of two children of Keziah and David Brooks, was born 7 June 1917 in the dining room of her maternal grandparents' home in Topeka, Kansas. Raymond Brooks was born in Chicago sixteen months after the birth of his sister Gwendolyn. Both of Brooks's parents were born in Kansas. When David Anderson Brooks was a young boy his family moved from Atchison, Kansas to Oklahoma City, where he

finished high school before moving to Nashville, Tennessee to attend Fisk University. Keziah Corinne Wims was born and educated in Topeka, Kansas. She had hoped for a career as a concert pianist, yet earned teaching credentials and taught fifth grade until she married in 1916. David Brooks, whose parents were formerly enslaved, was an aspiring physician who left Fisk University before completing his degree, as he found that family obligations and financial constraints prevented the successful completion of his studies.

With the support of family and friends, Gwendolyn Brooks began her career as a writer while very young. After Brooks's parents realised their daughter's poetic talent, they indulged her desire to write without interruptions. At the age of eleven, Brooks started collecting her poetry. And in 1930, she compiled the first of her four volumes of poetry notebooks, which the poet maintained until she was in her mid-twenties. The same year that she began compiling her poetry notebooks, Brooks's first published poem, "Eventide", appeared in *American Childhood*. She also started *The Champlain Weekly*, the first of several serial publications that she would eventually produce independently. In

1930, Gwendolyn Brooks was thirteen.

At the age of seventeen, Brooks became a regular contributor to the *Chicago Defender's* "Lights and Shadows" column, where she published numerous early poems. In the autumn following her graduation from high school in 1934, Brooks was among the first students to attend Wilson Junior College, which, she reports, provided her with a college education that she otherwise would not have received.

Throughout the 1930s Gwendolyn Brooks continued to write. In July of 1936 she produced a handmade volume of thirty-three poems under the title *Songs After Sunset*, which was comprised of poems that Brooks had written over the previous nine months but had never published. She also joined the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) Youth Council, a group of young black writers and intellectuals who met in the local YWCA to discuss art as well as social and political ideas. At one such discussion she met Henry Blakely, Jr., also a writer, and in 1939, Blakely and Brooks married. They later had two children, Henry Blakely III and Nora Blakely.

Also among Brooks's close associates in the 1930s were Theodore Ward and Edward Bland, members of Richard Wright's South Side Writers' Group, which Wright established in 1936. During her ongoing discussions with the spirited Chicago group of writers, artists, and intellectuals with whom she was associated, Brooks's middle-class notions of a transcendent, unified, and fixed social narrative began to change. Instead she developed a black group-consciousness that would move her poetry away from contemplations of love, nature, and nebulous abstract universals toward considerations of daily life among black people and toward realism. This was the first of three major shifts that Brooks was to make in her approach to poetry. The next change in Brooks's poetry resulted from her exposure, from 1941 to 1942, to modernist aesthetics in the poetry workshops organised by the wealthy Chicagoan Inez Stark and held at the South Side Community Center.

At all stages in her career Gwendolyn Brooks's fellow poets as well as the reviewers of her poetry acknowledged her poetic skill and acumen. James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes both encouraged a youthful Brooks to

develop her writing skills. After winning, in 1943, the Midwestern Writers' Conference prize for her Poem "Gay Chaps at the Bar", Gwendolyn Brooks sent samples of her poems to Harper and Brothers publishers. Elizabeth Lawrence, the poet's first editor at Harper's and her editor for just over twenty-five years, encouraged the young writer to submit enough poems for a book. Lawrence also sent Brooks a reader's report by Richard Wright. In his report, Wright only found one poem, "The Mother", problematical; he wanted Brooks to include a long poem, and he was concerned about the title, *A Street in Bronzeville*. Motivated by Wright's advice, Brooks wrote "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith".

A prolific poet, Gwendolyn Brooks wrote more than twenty books of poetry, including chapbooks and children's poetry, numerous articles and essays, several writing manuals, one novel, *Maud Martha* (1953), and two volumes of her memoirs, *Report from Part One* (1972) and *Report from Part Two* (1995). In an omnibus volume titled *Blacks* (1987), Brooks collects selections from her most important books. This valuable collection of Brooks's writing was the inaugural book under her imprint The David Company, which she

named for her father David Anderson Brooks. In addition to The David Company, Brooks also independently published her books under her Brooks imprint and her Black Position Press imprint.

In 1945 and 1949 when *A Street in Bronzeville* and *Annie Allen* respectively were published, many black writers were grappling with the publishing industry's dwindling interest in literature with African American or political themes. In most of the poems in *A Street in Bronzeville*, Brooks does not present bold protests, even though the poems in this her first book are about the black people she observed from her kitchenette apartment on Chicago's South Side – affectionately referred to as Bronzeville. This does not mean that these poems lack social commentary as some of her later critics have complained; in fact, Brooks uses her facility for creating the eloquent word or phrase to convey difficult concepts, a technique that she develops more fully in her second book, *Annie Allen*.

In *A Street in Bronzeville* Brooks saves most of her overt social critique for her sonnet series on the war, “Gay Chaps at the Bar”, and for her war-time poem “Negro Hero”. Without doubt,

however, the power of poems such as "The Mother", "Kitchenette Building", "A Song in the Front Yard", "The Ballad of Chocolate Mabbie", "Sadie and Maud", and "Ballad of Pearl May Lee" resides in their concern with social issues such as abortion, poverty, the limitations of class restrictions, restrictive gender roles, and lynching. Brooks's ability to demur eloquently in her early writing and her excellent employment of her craft, contributed to the warm critical reception that *A Street in Bronzeville* received from both black and white reviewers.

With the publication of *Annie Allen* (1949) Gwendolyn Brooks accomplished a number of things, not least of which was winning the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1950. One of her most controversial books, *Annie Allen* is a complex and nuanced collection of poetry, in which Brooks develops fully her innovative poetic style, only modified after 1967 when she made the third and final shift in her poetic ideas. Again, contemporary critics and reviewers praised Brooks while some later critics argued that *Annie Allen* distanced itself from its African American readership even more than *A Street in Bronzeville* had.

The poems in Brooks's *Annie Allen* are formally experimental in a Modernist vein. In “The Anniad”, for instance, she reworks the mock epic formula, and in “Sonnet-Ballad”, her experiments lead her to develop a new poetic form. Many of the poems in *Annie Allen* do not provide easy access, and the title poem, which is the most difficult of the poems in this book, is thick with obscure allusions and archaic language. Still, in her second book, Brooks fine-tunes the unique turns of phrase – such as “inconditions of love” and “daughters of the dusk” – that will characterise her best writing. In *Annie Allen*, Brooks also continues to write poetry that engages in subtle social arguments against injustice and carefully side-steps the call in the 1940s for so-called raceless literature.

The only long fictional work that Gwendolyn Brooks brought to completion is her Modernist novel *Maud Martha* (1953). Always an innovator, Brooks in this novel brings prose as close to poetry as she can without writing a long poem, an approach that did not find favour with the reviewers. Brooks's *Maud Martha* gained very little critical attention for over thirty years. Subsequent fictional projects that Brooks contemplated eventually became

poems. In 1954 Brooks developed an idea for her second novel titled “The Life of Lincoln West”. Brooks published this piece as a short story in 1963 and finally as a poem which she included in her volume *Family Pictures*, which was published in 1970. In 1957 Brooks considered writing another novel. Yet again the core idea for a fictional piece resulted in a poem. This time Brooks wrote “In the Mecca”, which is among the poet's most memorable pieces. Brooks finally published “In the Mecca” in 1968 – the same year that she became the second poet laureate of Illinois – as the title poem of her last collection of original poetry for Harper's publishing house. This book, which was nominated for the National Book Award for poetry, may be her best collection overall. In addition to the estimable title poem, with its ironic play on Biblical themes and its powerful evocation of the humanity and horror that an honest investigation of poverty reveals, Brooks's *In the Mecca* includes her ingenious sermons on the warpland, which recall the Sermon on the Mount and contrast the social promise of the United States with the reality of black life in the country at mid-century.

The Bean Eaters was published in 1960 and was Brooks's first book to receive unfavourable

criticism for being too “social” or “polemical”. Van Gogh's “The Potato Eaters” inspired the title of this book, which includes poems on poverty, the lynching of Emmett Till, the integration of Little Rock's Central High School, and the integration of Chicago's white neighbourhoods. *The Bean Eaters* marks the beginning of a shift in poetic consciousness for Gwendolyn Brooks, a shift that would become complete after she attended the Second Annual Writers' Conference at Fisk University in 1967. At this conference Brooks, then fifty, met the young Black Arts poets such as LeRoy Jones, later Amiri Baraka, who were formulating what they would eventually refer to as a new black aesthetic and who were calling into question the poetry of writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Robert Hayden. Brooks returned to Chicago from the Fisk University conference eager to develop what she referred to as her “newish G. B. voice”. She also began to work with young aspiring writers in Chicago and soon initiated the process of severing her ties with her long-time publisher Harper's. From 1971 until her death on 3 December 2000 Gwendolyn Brooks published her poetry either with African American publishers or under her own imprints.

Although virtually ignored by the dominant media after her break with the powerful publishing house, and after her subsequent association with Dudley Randall's Broadside Press and Haki Madhubuti's Third World Press, Brooks maintained her prominent role as a teacher and an esteemed writer. She also continued to receive pre-eminent national honours. She holds several honorary degrees, was selected as the National Endowment for the Humanities' Jefferson Lecturer, received a lifetime achievement award from the National Endowment for the Arts, was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and was the recipient of the National Medal of Arts Award among others.

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